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In recent months Iraq's Popular Army—the militia of the ruling Ba'th Party—has experienced a series of setbacks that may have undermined the status of its commander, First Deputy Prime Minister Taha Yasin Ramadan.

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Article

Iraq: Ramadan and the Popular Army

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In recent months Iraq's Popular Army—the militia of the ruling Ba'th Party—has experienced a series of setbacks, undermining its morale. Taha Yasin Ramadan, Iraq's First Deputy Prime Minister, commands the Popular Army and uses it as his personal power base, and we believe these reverses may have undermined his status.

As the Popular Army grew in size, Ramadan's political stature also increased. Ramadan, alone among important figures in the regime, had a personal power base. With the Popular Army behind him, Ramadan could rival even President Saddam Husayn.

Background

In 1970 the newly founded Ba'thist regime in Iraq created a militia of about 40,000 members of the Ba'th Party. This loyalist organization was to protect the Ba'th in the event of a coup or similar crisis. The Popular Army later expanded to its current strength of about 750,000. Its membership includes non-Ba'thists, expatriate Arab workers, secondary school and college students, and women.

Setbacks to the Popular Army
In 1983, Iran changed its war strategy in a way that adversely affected the Popular Army. The Iranians launched a war of attrition, focused in part on Iraqi Kurdistan. As part of Tehran's new strategy, Iranian-supported Kurdish guerrillas began targeting the Popular Army. the Kurds hate the Popular Army because it provides armed might for the Ba'th Party, which they believe intends to subjugate them.

The Popular Army has formations in all of Iraq's 14 provinces and is organized down to the village level. Popular Army cadres perform three to six months' active duty each year. They are commanded by regular Army officers, who also oversee their training. Instruction is largely confined to small-unit tactics. The cadres chiefly are armed with light weapons.

During the summer of 1983, the Kurds ambushed and killed a force of 28 Popular Army reservists, most of whom were students and teachers who had not previously seen combat. this so shocked Saddam that he ordered large cash payments to the families of the dead.

With the start of the Iran-Iraq war, Ramadan volunteered the Popular Army to fight at the front. It lacked the training and discipline for frontline duty, however, and was quickly withdrawn. Nonetheless, it has continued to make an important contribution to Iraq's war effort, providing rear-echelon services for the regular forces. The Popular Army currently has primary responsibility for maintaining security in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq.

The guerrillas also have entered major Kurdish cities and assassinated some members of the Popular Army, while kidnaping others and holding them for ransom.

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[redacted]
[redacted] The US Embassy reports that a local businessman in March saw over 100 uniformed bodies—presumably Popular Army members—on a road near As Sulaymaniyah, “stacked like cordwood.” The Embassy reported that 182 Popular Army troops were killed the same month in fights with the guerrillas, and another 150 were reported missing. [redacted]

The Army’s Morale Suffers

[redacted] the Popular Army’s desertion rate has increased because of events in Kurdistan. [redacted] the Mukhabarat (Iraq’s internal security force) has initiated “flying roadblocks,” in which buses, autos, and taxis are stopped to apprehend deserters and candidates for renewed tours in the Popular Army. Neighborhood Ba’th Party committees go door-to-door on the same mission [redacted]

The regime also has ordered the replacement of some senior military commanders of the Popular Army in Kurdistan. [redacted] the officers were removed for failing to subdue the guerrillas. In addition, Baghdad has ordered Popular Army officers to check the alertness of their units.

[redacted]

Meanwhile, US Embassy officials in Baghdad reported in May that Ramadan may have deliberately snubbed birthday observances for Saddam in a dispute over the Popular Army. Ramadan allegedly objected to the use of Popular Army units for dangerous mine-clearing operations during the Hawizah Marsh campaign last March. Complaining that he had not been consulted on this decision, Ramadan stayed away from the celebrations to register his displeasure. [redacted]

Implications for Iraq and Ramadan

Morale in the Popular Army is likely to continue to decline and to strain Iraq’s war effort. The Popular Army cadres are mostly drawn from Baghdad and

southern Iraq. They are unused to the rugged terrain of the north and are no match for the skilled Kurdish guerrilla fighters. Baghdad has resisted redeploying regular troops to Kurdistan because this could expose Iraq’s defenses along the eastern border to an Iranian breakthrough. If the Popular Army cannot cope, Baghdad will have no alternative to such a redeployment. [redacted]

Ramadan’s career also could be set back if the Popular Army suffers further reverses. Ramadan has made enemies among some military commanders by, in effect, turning the Popular Army into a rival of the regular Army. Some commanders may try to make him and the Popular Army scapegoats for the worsening situation in Kurdistan. [redacted]

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